

“We’re living life to the fullest!”

Katie and Elizabeth took on advanced melanoma and beat it! Here, they share their strategies for coping and feeling their best. Ask your care team if these tips will work for you, too! —BY AMY CAETTA AND KAREN KLEIMANN



“Stay connected”

Katie Ostrovsky, 39, Peoria, AZ

Be open to the latest therapies.

When a 9-millimeter discolored mole under Katie’s left forearm turned out to be stage IIA melanoma in 2006, she had surgery to remove it, and it seemed the episode was behind her. But in 2008, Katie—who had a two-week old baby and another child

starting kindergarten—discovered a “ping pong size” bump in her left armpit: The cancer had spread. She headed to the Mayo Clinic in California to participate in a clinical trial, but it didn’t work. “From head to toe, I had over 100 tumors,” she states. “I’ll never forget the words I was told: ‘We’re trying to turn your weeks into months.’” Then her doctors found a few more new treatments, including an immunotherapy. She was prescribed them back-to-back and, amazingly, the tumors starting disappearing! In January 2020, Katie—who is no longer on any cancer meds—and her family celebrated her six-year anniversary of clear scans. “My doctors call me ‘the miracle patient.’”

Become your own best advocate.

“There have been many times when I was not going to leave a doctor’s office until the treatment plan was changed because a therapy wasn’t working for me,” says Katie, who has had 14 surgeries, 14 rounds of radiation, three rounds of chemo and three rounds of

immunotherapies. “These moments are key points to saving your life. You have to find the strength—whether you pull it from your family, your parents, your best friend—to fight and become a voice. My husband, Benji, and I became advocates for this fight.” Katie shares her story on her Instagram account [@my_melanoma_world](#).

Invest in the right sunscreen. Along with wearing sun-protective clothes, Katie is also adamant about applying effective sunscreen. “Everyone needs to practice sun safety, and a melanoma patient should be wearing sunscreen,” she says. The American Cancer Society

recommends everyone use a sunscreen with an SPF of at least 30. Katie likes ones that are “vegan, paraben-free and free of harsh chemicals.”

Spread the word. In May 2019, Katie posted about her wellness journey on Instagram in honor of Skin Cancer Awareness Month. “I had been so afraid of my past, but it felt good to face it—and then I didn’t want to stop,” she explains. After forming a few small online groups, she has bonded with fellow survivors around the globe. “A number of these people were shy, but once they started telling their stories, they felt stronger and empowered.”



“Don’t give up”

Elizabeth McGowan, 59
Washington, DC

Be vigilant. From a young age, Elizabeth (a Pulitzer-Prize winning energy reporter) was worried about melanoma. After all, her father died of it when she was in her teens. Unfortunately, in 1985, she noticed a blue-black mole on her neck and found out she had developed it, too—at age 24. Within a year, the cancer had spread to her lymph system. ▶




She used her research skills to uncover and pursue new treatments, ultimately entering a clinical trial for a promising immunotherapy. “It was important for me to be involved in my care.” After much trial and error and various treatments to treat the cancer now in her lungs, liver and spleen, in 1996, Elizabeth was told she was cancer-free. These days, she focuses on prevention and careful, regular self-checks. She sees a dermatologist every six months and wears sunscreen every day—rain or shine.

Express your feelings. “You don’t have to be brave all the time,” says Elizabeth. “It’s okay to cry or scream or express whatever you feel. Don’t try to hold it in. It’s not helping anybody. But remember, tomorrow might be better.”

Carve out your own path. In 1991, Elizabeth opted to spend six months hiking the Appalachian trail end-to-end. Although her cancer was still in her lungs, it had stabilized thanks to a new treatment plan. “Hiking kept me

moving. It gave me purpose. Putting one foot in front of the other has always been therapeutic for my mind.” Then, in 2000, as a way to celebrate five years cancer-free, Elizabeth organized a solo cross-country bicycle journey as a fundraiser for melanoma research at the hospital that saved her life. “It ended up being so much more; it became a healing trip for my body and spiritual and mental self,” she says. She kept a journal, which eventually became the inspiration for her book, *Outpedaling the Big C: My Healing Cycle Across America*. “I wanted to demystify the cancer experience, but it also allowed me to process what happened to me and rediscover my father. Making myself vulnerable generated conversations with people I wouldn’t have otherwise met.” She shares more of her cancer journey on [facebook.com/elizabeth.mcgowan.author](https://www.facebook.com/elizabeth.mcgowan.author).

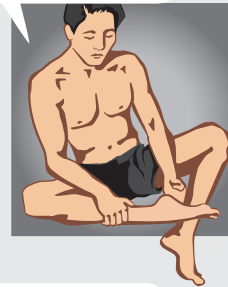
Be a statistics skeptic. “I’m not a number; I’m Elizabeth McGowan, the full human being. I never asked what my odds of survival were. I’d get through one step and go on to the next. Outcomes are unpredictable, but there are many avenues to explore. If one treatment doesn’t work, another may. Today, I’m 59 and proud of it.” 

SELF SCREENING GUIDE

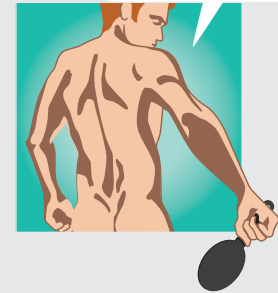
Be on the lookout for:

- Moles that begin to itch or bleed
- A spot that doesn’t heal
- A dark spot under the toenail or fingernail
- A flat, red spot that is rough, dry or scaly
- A spot that becomes painful or tender

Check hands, nails, soles of the feet and between the fingers and toes.



Check the front and back of your legs. Use a mirror to help you see your shoulders, back, buttocks and genitals.



Check your head, face, ears and back of your neck. A blow dryer may help you look at your scalp.



Check your abdomen, arms, underarms and chest, including under your breasts.



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